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ABSTRACT

Difficulties faced by homeless children include depression, low self-esteem, lack of sleep and nutrition, and feelings of shame and embarrassment. Challenges faced by schools in providing education to homeless children include: (1) keeping children in one school despite frequent family moves; (2) ensuring that children's health records are obtained; (3) providing quiet times for children to do homework; and (4) providing transportation. The education of homeless children was addressed by the McKinney Act of 1987, which called for access to free education for every homeless child. Amendments to the act passed in 1990 mandated that states address issues of transportation, immunization and residency requirements, and school and health records. Measures that schools can take to help homeless children succeed in their education include: (1) coordinating social services; (2) providing counseling; (3) providing a place for children between the closing of school and the opening of the shelter; and (4) using computerized tracking systems to coordinate homeless children's records. Several communities have tried comprehensive approaches to educating homeless children. These approaches include transitional schools for homeless children, which children attend before being mainstreamed into regular schools, and case management approaches, in which a case manager coordinates school staff, counselors, shelter workers, and health care and family support services in order to meet homeless children's basic needs. (BC)

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ERIC Digest

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Homeless Children: Meeting the Educational Challenges

Brad Goins and Bernard Cesarone

Parents and their children can become homeless as a result of unemployment, domestic violence, eviction, or other causes. Estimates of the number of homeless children range from 300,000 to 1.6 million (Portner, 1992). No accurate estimate exists due to the practical difficulties involved in locating and tracking homeless families.

Difficulties Faced by Homeless Children and Their Parents

Homeless children, like all children, have different levels of resilience. The length of time without a home, the reasons for homelessness, the availability of support systems, and the age, sex, and temperament of the child all contribute to a particular child's reaction to being homeless. For many children, the stress of homeless life frequently causes high levels of depression and anxiety and low self-esteem. Many children deal with these emotional states by engaging in either aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Other more specific behaviors, such as truancy, hyperactivity, dependent behaviors, or underachievement, may become pronounced. Lack of nutrition and lack of sleep, the latter caused by the noise of shelters or the child's stress level, often result in cognitive difficulties in reading and calculating and in difficulties in concentrating. Suicidal feelings are common among children over 5 years of age (Rosenman and Stein, 1990).

Feelings of shame or embarrassment usually accompany homelessness. Parents are often embarrassed about the child's homeless status, and children frequently fear that they may be stigmatized by their classmates if their homeless status becomes known. Because of the psychological and cognitive difficulties they face, and the stresses of living in shelters, homeless children often need special counseling and other forms of assistance if they are to succeed in educational settings.

Challenges to Educators

For almost every homeless child, schools face the following challenges:

1. Keeping the child in one school, or a minimal number of schools, in spite of the family's frequent moves or the fact that the child has no permanent residence.

2. Ensuring that the child's health records are obtained and keeping all the child's records intact. (Homeless children's parents often have difficulty obtaining required health records. When children move from school to school, records sometimes get lost.)

3. Providing a quiet time to compensate for the stressful noise of shelters and to allow the child to do homework.

4. Providing transportation.

In certain situations, schools may also need to provide help in obtaining access to laundries or to clean clothing, special and gifted education, or counseling.

Solutions: Legislation

The McKinney Act of 1987 (Public Law 100-77) calls for every homeless child to have access to free education and provides funds for the provision of this education. The act, which was amended in 1988 and 1990, mandates that states review their school residency laws and revise any laws that prevent homeless children from receiving public education. If a child moves during the school year, the act mandates that the child either be allowed to remain in his or her first school, or move to a school in the new district, whichever is in the child's best interest. Parents' opinions are to be considered in the process of deciding which school the child is to attend. Homeless children are to receive school services that are comparable to those other children receive. School districts must maintain homeless children's records and expedite their transfer as necessary. Schools are prohibited from delaying a homeless child's entry into school due to delays in obtaining school records. The act provides a grant for each state board of education to establish an office of the Coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth (Strong, 1991).

The 1990 amendments to the act (Public Law 101-645) mandate that all state plans for implementation of programs for homeless children address the issues of transportation; immunization, residency, and guardianship requirements; and requirements for birth certificates, and school and health records. The amendments also call for the provision of coordinated and comprehensive services to homeless children and their families (Center for Law and Education, 1991).

Solutions for Educators

At the very least, every school and school district should follow the guidelines of the McKinney Act in eliminating obstacles to the enrollment of homeless children in school. Homeless children should receive the help they need to obtain any required immunizations. Arrangements can be made to provide immunizations on-site as is necessary. Cumbersome residency or guardianship requirements, or other requirements regarding birth certificates or other records, can be waived or altered, depending on the student's situation.

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Once the homeless child's ability to attend school is guaranteed, educators need to take measures to help homeless children succeed in their education in spite of the tremendous obstacles they face. Practices that are likely to be helpful in these efforts are:

- Coordinating social services for homeless children,
- Educating children about homelessness and encouraging empathy for the homeless,
- Providing counseling for both the homeless and any classmates who ridicule them (Rosenman and Stein, 1990),
- Providing a place for children to go between the time school closes and the time the shelter opens,
- Providing housing specialists who will work with shelters in order to improve children's housing,
- Using a computerized tracking system to coordinate homeless children's records, including health records, and their movements from shelter to shelter or from school to school. (Schools can promise to keep all information about addresses confidential in order to reduce the risk of stigmatization.)

It is important to keep in mind that homeless children should not merely be tolerated; they should be *included* in the educational setting. Homeless children need positive peer relationships and friendships. Teachers ought to be aware of the degree to which homeless children are accepted within the group and take measures to assure that homeless children are included in the culture of the classroom in positive ways. Teachers can use such strategies of inclusion as peer pairing, the use of cooperative learning groups, acceptance of diversity, and promotion of friendship development.

Comprehensive Approaches

Several communities have established special *transitional schools* for homeless children. These schools offer homeless children "intensive and individualized care for a short time," after which the children are mainstreamed into regular schools (Portner, 1992). Advocates of this approach maintain that it gives homeless children the chance to receive individual instruction in an atmosphere that is "psychologically safe" (Portner, 1992). But critics fear that specialized schools may actually increase the stigmatization of homeless children.

Some programs for homeless children that are located in public schools use a *case management approach*. In these programs, a case manager works to coordinate school staff, counselors, shelter workers, and health care and family support services in a comprehensive effort to see that the children's basic needs are met. The case manager may help the homeless child's parents negotiate daunting procedures and requirements of service agencies, or may arrange for needed services to be provided at the school or shelter. Case managers also provide parents with access to resources concerning health, housing, counseling, or any other area of concern. The case manager may be a social worker who is hired on a full-time basis by the school that is housing the program (James, 1991).

Seattle's B.F. Day Elementary School features both a transitional school, First Place, and a case management approach, Kids Organized on Learning in School (KOOL-IS). For more information, contact B.F. Day Elementary School, 3921 Linden Avenue N, Seattle, WA 98103, 206-281-6340, or see Portner and James below.

Comprehensive approaches to educating homeless children can be geared to intervene with the entire family of the homeless child. Schools or programs can offer parents adult education (GED, literacy) or job training, or can direct parents to programs that already offer these services to homeless adults. If there are younger siblings, public preschool education for children-at-risk, or federally funded Head Start programs, can be contacted. Older siblings who have dropped out of school should be encouraged to enter alternative school programs.

For more information

Contact:

Children's Defense Fund
122 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 628-8787

Homeless Information Exchange
1830 Connecticut Avenue NW
4th Floor
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 638-1526

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